

John McLaughlin

All in the Family Crazy

By Mike Zwerin

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PARIS — One thing John McLaughlin likes about being a member of the family of jazz musicians is that you can be as loony as you want. Being nuts is accepted. It goes with the music. He'd much rather get loonier than wiser with age. It's even expected. All the brothers and sisters out there know that it's really that other great big "sane" world that's crazy.

McLaughlin's new album, **The Promise** (Verve), is a visit down a long and winding Memory Lane. Recorded in Tokyo, Paris, Milan, New York, London and Wiltshire, England, and Monaco (where he lives), it recalls his electric and acoustic jazz, rock, organ trio and classical and Indian musical incarnations back to the '60s.

Although he might be called a guitar hero's guitar hero, behind that rock star persona is a serious player who, despite temptation right and left, just wants to get it on. Playing with Miles Davis taught him the value of silence (**In A Silent Way**). But his breakneck heroics do not put him in a position to advise young guitarists to play slower. He tries to overwhelm guitar players, he won't deny it. Unlike competition between corporations and athletes, however, nobody loses here.

It's a matter of being worthy of the family. He remembers knocking on Davis' dressing room door one sweaty, stomping Saturday night in New York. "John!" The trumpeter jumped up. "Come on in. What you been up to?" He sat down again, got up, walked around. Here was this historic figure, the embodiment of "cool"; an icon with nothing left to prove to anybody, and still he was nervous. He felt he had to do it one more time in New York. Another moment of truth. One more rush. For the family.

On **The Promise**, McLaughlin revives his acoustic guitar trio with Paco de Lucia and Al DiMeola. He plays Indian music again with Trilok Gurtu and Zakir Hussain. He plugs in again with rock guitarist Jeff Beck. Beck and McLaughlin used to tear it up together in the '70s. Family. "Jazz Jungle", a 14-minute jazz-rock fusion celebration, features Michael Brecker. With his Mahavishnu Orchestra, McLaughlin had been just about the king of fusion.

He scratched his head: "Critics say 'Thank God fusion is dead,' as though it was a pestilence in the land of jazz. They blame me for being a kind of carrier. But I really do love that music. What am I supposed to do—punch them in the nose?"

“Jazz Jungle” was recorded live. “Live” in a studio context means everybody played together—a procedure becoming more and more rare. We live under the not so benevolent reign of King Technology. No, God more than King. Musicians worship computer screens like altars in recording studios. If there’s a choice, the machine should be comfortable not the people.

For example, two hornmen recently recorded a “unison” passage in state-of-the-art fashion—meaning one by one, each wearing earphones. Playing at the same time would have been heresy. (The sin we are avoiding here is called “leakage”.) In any case, it never even occurred to the producer. McLaughlin finds it odd that musicians playing the same music at the same time is odd enough to be worth mentioning.

He also finds it odd to have to continue to defend the idea that there is more than one kind of swing. Shouldn’t that be obvious by now? Swing is universal. A polka can swing. Dennis Chambers with his current band “The Free Spirits” is one of the few drummers around to be both willing and able to go back and forth between what McLaughlin calls “a spiritual backbeat” and jazz’s looser “ding-ding-de-ding” three-on-a-ride-cymbal sort of swing:

“Dennis is always on my case on stage. That’s the way it should be. I’m on his too. It’s all about interaction. You let yourself be provoked, and you provoke the other guys. Go for broke.” The Free Spirits shuffle tempi, time signatures and dynamics to a point where they themselves do not know what to expect.

Chambers will shift the beat back an eighth note, for example. The tempo is the same as before except that it comes an eighth later. It’s never been rehearsed or even discussed. Just bing: “Surprise!” McLaughlin is hanging on by his teeth. He can feel the tension down his back. If not for that eighth note it sounds perfectly normal. But lose it and you’re in big trouble. At some point Chambers is going to come back inside and you’d better be in the right place. It’s all about listening, which gives McLaughlin faith in the human race. People who can still listen to each other can still be free spirits.

The music of Shakti, his fusion quartet with three Indians in it, was all about East and West listening to each other. Talk about universal swing. When they played Venice in 1989, people in the audience began to cry as the violinist L. Shankar was exposing a classical raga with a drone.

He’s really on tonight, McLaughlin thought; he’s breaking hearts out there. The crying got louder and a full Coca Cola bottle arrived on the stage. He was afraid the next one might hit his guitar or his head. Outside a car was burning and students banged the gates shouting “music should be free.” The band began to weep too. It was tear gas and this time bones were more likely to be broken than hearts.

In April, he will give two concerts in France with the master drummer Elvin Jones; a follow-up to their record **After The Rain**. They play “My Favorite Things” and “Take the Coltrane” and other tunes associated with Trane when Jones accompanied him. The

record was released by PolyGram France and the concerts are in the cadre of the Parisian Banlieues Blues festival and this is no coincidence, according to McLaughlin:

“When it comes to knowing how to treat jazz right the French are the best. Only the French would take the trouble to work out all the details to put me and Elvin together—would know and care enough even to try.” He laughed conspiratorially: “You know, I hate to say anything nice about the French, it sort of sticks in your throat. But thank God for those kind of people.”

Like the man said, family.